Help Resources in Games: Gamers' Opinions and Preliminary Design Remarks

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ABSTRACT

Help resources are available in many ways and required in many applications. However, in the digital game context, little has been investigated and discussed about *why*, *how* and *when* to offer help in order to not jeopardize the gameplay. In this work, we present an exploratory research on gamers' preferences and opinions about help in games, conducted by means of an online survey. We found out gamers prefer help resources to be fast, discreet, and relevant, capable of fostering learning, so they can evolve by themselves. We also observed that gamers need these resources in specific moments, and they must be perceived as necessary in order to avoid disturbing the gameplay. Finally, we make available some design remarks to support designers to better understand gamers' needs and improve design in what concerns to help resources in games.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.2. Information Interfaces and Presentation: User Interfaces; Training, help, and documentation; K.8.0. General: Games

Author Keywords

Help; games; gamers' preferences

INTRODUCTION

Digital games are increasingly popular entertainment. Frequently, gamers may be trying new games (or new game styles) for the first time, or may be beginners to games in general. That said, designers may benefit from knowing gamers' thoughts and preferences about help in games, so they can adjust design to these expectations and yet foster the game-learning process, which a well-valued concern among gamers.

In this paper, we deepen a previous exploratory investigation about gamers' preferences [12] in respect to help resources

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in games by carrying out a content analysis over two open questions concerning to gamers' opinions about help in games. Upon analysis, we discuss gamers' thoughts about help in games, whether it is considered important or not, as well as what kind of help they use in their favorite games.

As per our study, gamers prefer help resources to be fast, discreet, and relevant, capable of fostering learning, so they can evolve by themselves, being this our main contribution. We believe these findings may support game designers to produce better help resources by taking as starting point the knowledge on how help resources affect the gamers' experience.

The next sections present theoretical aspects later related to our findings, the explanation of the research done on the data obtained, our findings during the analysis, and our final considerations and perspectives for the future of this research.

BACKGROUND

Help resources in digital games are not frequently addressed in academic papers. It is possible to find research about game learning [9], gamer experience [6], gamer behavior [11], and even affect evoked by games [3, 4], for instance, but not about help in games. However, according to the literature consulted, the strategies a gamer adopts are crucial for a good gameplay, and as such help resources should also be, for they may take part in these strategies.

Also, we observed that there exist diverse understandings and approaches about gamer experiences, such as learning to play, usability, gameplay, the first attempt to play, and immersion, and we believe that these subjects may be used to support our understanding about gamers' thoughts and preferences concerning to help resources. The topics addressed in this section shall bring some key aspects to support this work results discussion.

Learning to play: Iacovides, Cox and Knoll [7] conducted a survey with experienced gamers that revealed some strategies they use to learn how to play a game. The strategies observed during the research were basically: trial and error, experiment, stop and think, and practice and accepting the tip.

Usability and gameplay: Kieras [8] explains the differences between software used for work and game software. The author suggests that we imagine a 'Solve Problem' button. Since a work software is only a tool for the user to perform

their tasks, this button would be the usability utopia, making users' lives much easier – the ultimate goal of a work software. In contrast, in the game context this button would be a 'killjoy' because gamers want the challenge; without it the fun element might disappear altogether. This is when the usability should be moderated or adapted for the sake of the gameplay.

The initial play: Cheung, Zimmermann and Nagappan's work [2] defines the "first hour" experience as the first contact a gamer has with a game. The first time a gamer plays a game is crucial to the success of the venture, because it is from this inaugural test that this gamer can engage, feeling urged to play more, or be discouraged and abandon the match. Furthermore, the authors also noticed that, in cases of negative experiences during the first attempt to play, gamers may influence other gamers (or potential ones) negatively.

Immersion: It is an important aspect that a digital game can offer gamers [1]. Through it, gamers immerse in an state of "flow", due to the feeling of being intensely involved in the game scenario. According to the authors, the immersion experience is completely different from simply playing a match. An immersed gamer is so involved that they can spend hours in front of a monitor without noticing the time. For gamers to reach the immersion stages, it is necessary that they pull down some barriers between the game and the gamers. Such barriers may relate to the type of game, empathy with the same, and even elements of the game itself (graphics, sound and plot).

METHODOLOGY

The work was designed as an exploratory research seeking to gather information about gamers' thoughts regarding help resources in games, such as preferences, importance, suitability, reasons to offer help in games, and so on. For such, we recruited participants during a game conference to answer an online survey. We provided them with a tablet, individually explained how they should proceed, and gave them privacy.

Participants differed in age and gender: from a total of 180 respondents, 135 were men and 45 were women, ranging from 18 to 54 years old. First, they had to accept a consent form to proceed, only then they would have access to the survey. It comprised 11 closed-ended questions, whose analysis accounts for gamers' *preferences* concerning help features in games, and was presented in our previous work [12]. The survey also asked participants to answer 2 open-ended questions, which are the subject of analysis of this paper, as detailed next.

The first of these open questions asked about the respondents' *opinion* on whether or not games should provide some kind of help resource and the *reasons* for that, while the second asked to enumerate the kinds of help resources available in the games they play.

That said, given the nature of the data, we chose to use a qualitative analysis approach, more specifically the qualitative content analysis method, accordingly to Lazar, Feng and Hochheiser [10]. For enabling this process we used RQDA (R-based Qualitative Data Analysis), a software tool for coding and categorization procedures.

FINDINGS

As observed, the need for help in digital games is real, and there even seems to be a formed opinion about what type of help is preferable for each style of game, as presented in our previous work [12]. Now we present the reasons behind these preferences, which are the subject of this paper. We highlight participants' opinions by using the identification Pn, where "n"is an integer identifying participants from 1 to 180.

Gamers' Opinions About Help in Games

Considering participants' opinions about the need of help resources in games, we noticed that many were only concerned on naming the kinds of help they consider best instead of providing the reasons behind it. This was taken into consideration during analysis, leading to two non-mutually exclusive coding categories: Motivation (the 'whys') and Shape (the 'hows').

Reasons for having (or not) help in games (the 'whys')
Under the Motivation category, we considered justifications or causes of gamers' opinions, which were codified as follows: For beginners (33 replies); Complex games (28 replies); To progress in the game (21 replies); To improve the gameplay (21 replies); and The challenge is part of the fun (32 replies).

As observed, most of the time that a respondent claimed help resources are not necessary, it followed with an appreciation for the challenge that the game presents. That is, these participants felt positive about the experience of not knowing what to do and exploring a new world ("*I like to learn with trial and error [...]*" - P24; and "*No [help is not necessary], the challenges are part of the fun.*" - P25). On the other hand, for some others, the need for help depend on the game: complex games or the ones with many control buttons were quoted as cases where help might be necessary ("*It [the necessity of help] depends on the complexity of the game*" - P20).

Some argued that help resources are especially important for beginners in a digital game style (simulator, action game, puzzle, etc.), at least to make them familiar with the controls. Others told they want help only when they are "stuck" in the game or need to pass a phase or to progress. In fact, some gamers who first said to be against help came to admit that help would be necessary to achieve progress if stagnant, mainly if one is new to a game ("*Yes [help is necessary], because if someone starts playing a game with no prior experience, they would not be able to evolve in the game.*" - P25).

Finally, we coded under "To improve the gameplay" all the comments about the *feelings* of a gamer in respect to a game, including those talking about frustration. For example: "*[...] The gamer needs some sort of baseline so they can start learning about the game. Without this resource, the gamer will probably get sick of the game quickly and leave it aside.*" - P174; and "*Yes, the complexity of the game demands some help to make the experience less frustrating.*" - P157.

How to provide help in games (the 'hows')
As said before, participants were asked for their opinions about help in games, if necessary or not and why, but some wrote about how they wanted to receive help, leading to the Shape category, comprising the codes: Natural (27 replies); Optional

(24 replies); Minimal (20 responses); Discreet (19 replies); In graphic (12 replies); External (5 replies); Manuals (4 replies).

In this research, we have often seen the dislike for the amount of help the game provides. That is why we developed the Minimal code, for the cases when tips were suggested and quoted as desirable features. However, despite respondents complained about too much information, it bothers them even more the fact that help sometimes can be *inconvenient*, described by many as "invasive". So we created the Discreet code, one of the most striking issues during analysis ("*Yes, help is important, but in a more disguised way so that the gamer is not bothered by it.*" - P103; and "*[...] it would be interesting to have a non-invasive aid [...]*" - P107).

However, we must point out that the discreet help desired by respondents is not necessarily minimal. It may be the case, but we didn't look for correlation between Discreet and Minimal help. On the other hand, help in graphic could be considered discreet but we decided to create its own code because we are not sure that this was the sense used by the respondents.

The popularity of certain games has generated online communities where gamers around the world exchange information. This is one of the most used way to learn and share knowledge about a game and was quoted by many respondents. Yet, despite these cases fall into the External code, it is important to call attention to the fact that not always gamers need to leave the game, for some games have their own communication channel so that gamers can help each other [5].

The Optional code covers the accounts of participants who prefer it when the aid is not exposed before them; when according to their needs they can access the help in the moment they understand it is due. That said, we believe that the claims for discretion could be solved by making help optional.

At last, by preferring a natural kind of help, the participants implied the desire to learn by themselves, through the use of elements already known to them, as some have mentioned. In addition, they would like the game levels to evolve more gradually, just like naturally happens during a typical learning process ("*Yes [help is necessary], but in a moderate way, where the gamers can learn intuitively.*" - P120; and "*In my opinion, the game should be able to teach naturally everything the gamer needs to know to be able to play the game*" - P3). Lastly, the code Manuals includes all replies from those gamers that use manuals.

Kinds of Help Available to Gamers

Considering participants' accounts for the kinds of help resources made available in the games they play, after clearing the data, we analyzed 142 responses, which include those answers stating that no help is available. The types of help provided were then codified as: Tutorial (50 replies); Do not use *in-game* help (26 replies); Graphic elements (18 replies); Tips (18 replies); Control buttons (16 replies); Typical Help (11 replies); Cut Scenes (5 replies); Others (18 replies).

As we have observed, even though some respondents claimed not to use any help, further on the survey they admitted to need assistance at some point, so they attend to online forums, watch live matches or via YouTube, etc. These answers were codified as "Do not use *in-game* help", since help is provided, but by another channel.

Although the remaining coding may be self-explanatory, the differences between them are subtle. Regarding help on commands, controls or button mechanics, the respondents told they search for it on menus (typical help). However, since this was a very recurrent theme, proven to be of special importance to gamers, we created a dedicated code for it: Control buttons. Respondents also cited the use of manuals, load screens, and the official game documentation on the company's website, but those were coded as "Others" due to the low frequency.

DISCUSSION

As for the results of this work, we observed that help resources are indeed desirable, however there is a concern about their suitability, considering the different types of games and gamers' profiles, as well as the amount of help available in each case. We concentrate our discussion on these aspects.

Our findings point out that participants are favorable about providing help for beginners as a way to present new game scenarios and styles (aligned with Cheung et al. [2]), and also for complex or different games. They stand that help resources should work to make games accessible to different gamers' profiles and to the public in general. Even though, aligned with Kieras [8], many participants seemed reluctant about help in games, for they argue that the challenge is part of the fun, keeping them excited and interested in the game. That is why many of them resort to "Trial and Error" as the main strategy, as also observed by Iacovides et al. [7].

Regarding preferences on how to make help available, too much information may be inconvenient, as well as invasive when help is not explicitly required by the gamer. In fact, presenting help when not required may compromise the gamers' involvement, and consequently the immersion, a concept from Brown and Cairns [1]. However, there is yet a question about whether, how and when the game should actively offer help during the gameplay, being this an important design issue. In addition, participants rather learning games than having the solutions revealed. That is, they prefer being fostered to reason and arrive at solutions for themselves. Hence, help need not only to be optional, minimal and discreet, but also natural.

In relation to the kind of help currently available in the game context, the codes "Do not use *in-game* help" and "Tutorial" had together 76 replies, indicating that participants usually resort to external channels when need help. However, the codes "External" and "Manuals", used to codify the way they want to be helped, just amounted to 9 replies. This probably means that looking for help in tutorials or elsewhere besides the game itself is not desirable, but is common practice.

Finally, we noticed a dichotomy between the preferred type of help (as per our previous paper [12]) and the most used one. The preferred help resource was the graphical tip, however, only 12.6% of the participants claimed to use it in comparison to tutorials, which are used by 35%. That is, even though the former is preferred, gamers have been using tutorials more, which makes us wonder if it's by the lack of graphical help.

Still about the first paper [12], we draw attention to the inconsistency of some respondents who claimed not to use any help, but contradicted themselves by saying they needed assistance at some point. This suggests it could be worth to investigate their comprehension about what *help in games* means.

Design Remarks

As for our findings, some remarks might be useful to those designers concerned about improving gamers' experience and learning by providing better help resources:

- Long explanations are not desirable.
- Small *tips* are preferred, specifically when learning about game controls and buttons.
- Help resources for beginners should support the first-hour experience in games to avoid confusion and frustration, keeping gamers interested and progressing.
- Help resources must offer progress perception without compromising the immersion, prioritizing the game learning in a discreet and natural way.
- Diverse gamers' profiles should have their specific help needs attended (e.g.: beginners vs. experts).
- Help resources could work with intelligence techniques in order for the game to perceive and learn gamers' needs, according to their profiles and preferences.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this work we presented an exploratory research on gamers' opinions regarding help in games. According to our findings, help resources need to be optional, minimal, discreet and natural, so they could foster the learning. In fact, gamers wish to be able to learn as they evolve in the game, and use this acquired knowledge to progress through each stage, having the felling that it was their own accomplishment.

We observed that help resources are necessary to motivate beginners, but they should be punctual and available only when needed, in order to avoid disturbing the gameplay or immersion. Beyond avoiding being interrupted, the most reinforced aspect was the desire to keep feeling challenged by the game.

In what concerns to our design remarks, gamers expect that a game could perceive their needs, and only offer help when it is appropriate. Also, participants pointed out their preference for small tips (for example, tips on how to use the game controls) in opposition to long explanatory texts, for they could disturb the gameplay.

We believe that the knowledge gathered during this research might support game designers to reflect about the importance of providing help resources that fit gamers' expectations and improve gamers' experience. As future work, we plan to analyze data gathered from a user observation over a puzzle game in which help resources proved to be challenging or not enough for the most.

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